

St. PAUL'S CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Mark 4: 35 - 41, June 24, 2018

The Back of the Boat

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This has been a tough week, hasn't it. We've seen images of children alone, resting on mats on the floor, surrounded by what look like cages; we've heard those children crying, sobbing; we've seen faces of desperate parents, we've heard rhetoric from all corners – sometimes cruel, sometimes vicious, sometimes heartbreaking. We've heard the Bible quoted in ways we don't understand, that don't sound like the teachings of Jesus we've come to know. It's been an overwhelming week of emotion, sadness, anger, frustration – all those things. This is not about politics – it's about trying to live as Jesus taught us, it's about trying to follow Jesus as a faithful disciple. It's about how we treat each other as children of God. And for me, the realization that some of this has been going on for years and years has been even more overwhelming – how can this be?

And then there's the question, what can we do about it? Maybe we march. Maybe we participate in vigils and worship like we will later today in Bloomfield. Maybe we call and write our

representatives, local and in Washington. But maybe we're paralyzed. Compassion fatigue sets in. We don't know what to do. Or worse, we don't believe we can make a difference. It's been a tough week.

In the midst of all this emotion, our lives go on - this week we also observe the first day of summer – school's out, graduations are done, the Garden State Parkway is a parking lot on Friday afternoons. And our summer hours here in the office are a week away – the pace here slows, meetings are pretty much on hold until the fall. Of course our ministry continues year round – the joys and sorrows of community life don't take a vacation, do they.

This year I'm especially looking forward to catch my breath – my vacation begins tomorrow morning – it's been a good but busy year indeed – and I'm ready for some R&R, to recharge my batteries before looking ahead to an exciting fall. I'm looking forward to being in my garden, walking on a beach, taking a few days out of town: all this is an opportunity to rest and re-create and nurture my own soul. With the overwhelming backdrop of today's news stories, those images and sounds, interspersed with the demands of daily living, I know I need to nurture my own soul.

This story from the gospel of Mark is ever so appropriate especially this week – it's a rich story, familiar to all of us and it has a message for me about the need to rest and recharge. Kirk

Jones, a professor at Andover Newton Theological School has written a book called, “Rest in the Storm” – while this is a book primarily written for clergy, it’s also written for other caregivers as well and you know, we’re all caregivers – as parents, in our daily work, as citizens, as disciples of Christ, however we spend our time. I’d like to share with you some of his thoughts about this story because they are truly applicable to where I am right now and I’d guess to all of us in different ways as well.

Dr. Jones was a pastor at a church in Pennsylvania at one time and found himself alone at home one night, feeling overwhelmed, frustrated. He sat down to find some inner strength as he read the Bible and found himself reading this very passage, the passage that brought him healing.

He writes, “This scripture touched me deeply. Suddenly in my mind I was the one on a boat in a raging storm. For the past few weeks I had been caught up in the storm of my life – never before had I felt so vulnerable and so unable to control what was going on in my own mind and body. As the tears began to roll down my face, I prayed, Lord, I’m in my storm now. I need you to calm my storm. In the next moments I began to feel like I was enveloped by a peaceful calm. A sense of ease washed over me. Suddenly I was not so afraid anymore. I felt relief and new energy welling up inside of me.” (p. 24)

So, what was it that touched Dr. Jones so deeply – we’ve all read this story before, heard sermons about it; have we ever stopped to think about how Jesus’ actions on the boat are a model for us on how to handle, how to cope with our own times of overload, of stress, and maybe even as a model of how to keep us from riding into those storms in the first place?

Dr. Jones has re-written the story a little:

All day long, Jesus had been teaching from the bow of a borrowed boat. For the hundreds who gathered to hear the Teacher that day, the serene waters served as a backdrop to his stories about lamps, bushel baskets, and mustard seeds. He used the ordinary around them to explode the extraordinary inside them. As dusk approached, Jesus brought his teaching session to a close. His disciples gathered around him, and the portable pulpit became a ferry to the next stop on their truth-telling journey.

As they made themselves comfortable for the roughly ten-mile trek to shore, one by one the disciples realized that, not only had Jesus taken leave of the crowd, he was taking leave of them too. I can imagine about that time, Peter approached Jesus with a story that he just knew Jesus was going to love. Before Peter could begin the story, though, Jesus politely waved him off. Judas, the group’s treasurer, had been waiting for some time to present Jesus with a plan for securing additional revenue for their rapidly

expanding ministry. The Savior walked past him and said, “Let’s talk about it later.” Just then, James and John asked Jesus about the coming kingdom and their new status and seating in it. Jesus responded with a glare – maybe like the look senior saints gave us as children when we were out of line at church – there was no mistaking that look, was there.

Jesus walked past James and John and made his way to the lower deck. He entered a back room and shut the door behind him. Maybe he opened the door again, just long enough to hang a sign outside that read “Do Not Disturb.”

Then the story tells us that Jesus fell asleep while he was in the back of the boat. I think we all forget that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine – he ate, he got angry, he got tired, he slept – he experienced the same broad range of human emotions that we do.

Jesus fell asleep! That should be enough of an example for us but there’s probably more to this. When you go to bed, do you always fall asleep right away? And do you stay asleep through the night? I don’t – sometimes I read, or watch TV – I replay in my mind the events of the day or that happened years ago – those shouldas, wouldas, and couldas come to the surface. Or I worry about tomorrow’s events. My brain just won’t shut off. Don’t we

all do that at one time or another? Sometimes night after night! I'm sure we share that experience.

So we wonder about how Jesus fell asleep – what did he do when he went to bed? Maybe he carved a little – he was a carpenter first, wasn't he. Or maybe he looked out at the sea and allowed himself to be mesmerized by the waves below and the stars above. We don't know what he did back there but we do know what he didn't do.

He didn't preach to anyone. He didn't teach anyone. He didn't heal anyone. While he was in the back of the boat, he was not engaged in ministry to others.

We have to go to the back of the boat too. We have to carve out time for ourselves to regenerate, to rest, to replenish our own spirits. Going to the back of the boat isn't a luxury – it's a necessity! Going to the back of the boat – taking the “off time” is what makes the “on time” possible.

So why do so many of us have trouble going to the “back of the boat”? For me I'm sure it has something to do with my deeply embedded New England habits – gotta be busy! Gotta be accomplishing something! I'm a list maker – I'll think of something and write it down so I won't forget. And then I get great satisfaction out of crossing things off the list – I can look at it and know that I've “accomplished something.” And if there are

still things to do on the list – and there always are – I find myself driven to keep “doing” just to clear the list. Well, it never happens – it’s never empty. There’s always something more.

We define ourselves by what we do, don’t we. We ask someone we just met, what do you do? And the response usually is, I’m a mother, I’m a minister, I’m a doctor, I’m a teacher, a lawyer, - something like that – we define ourselves by our jobs. Maybe this is part of the difficulty folks have at retirement – their whole self-definition changes and often they can begin to doubt their own self-worth. What they do is no longer in the forefront. It’s hard to separate who we are from what we do, what we produce, how many things we can cross off our “to do” lists.

Well, let’s look to Jesus as a model again: Jesus was able to go to the back of the boat easily and regularly because he knew that as much as he was a healer, a preacher, a teacher, he was something else – something much more, something much deeper. He was a child of God. And as a child of God he needed time for soul nurturing. He needed time to listen to his heart and to join his heart with God’s heart regularly and anew. He needed time to receive as well as to give. He needed time to relish being for being’s sake.

And so do we. At the back of the boat our being can be replenished for life and for service. The back of the boat is a

sacred place: it's where we go to remember not only who we are but whose we are – children of God. Children of God loved unconditionally for who we are – not for what we do. The back of the boat is where we can take the time to savor the feeling of being held in the palm of God's hands, where we can feel God's fingers gently holding us while the storms of life rage all around us. The back of the boat is where we can re-establish our relationship with God, ground ourselves and receive all that we need to go on with our daily lives, to deal with the overwhelming events of the day.

I've always been a little startled at how quickly the activity stops once school ends – the phone is quieter, attendance at worship collapses - people have actually told me that they don't "do church" in the summer. Summer is the usual time for vacations, for turning off "regular life" – but, you know, I see people working just as hard at turning off as they did during the year with all the activity. They work hard to schedule their vacation time – even the supposed "down time" was full of things to do, not time to be. Certainly people are tired! But vacation time doesn't always equal going to the back of the boat, does it. What would happen if we went to the back of the boat on a regular basis – 12 months of the year – not just in the summer! If we think about it, that's what Jesus did. Jesus took time out of his schedule



for prayer, for rest, for nurturing his body and his spirit on a regular basis, not just in the summer or during school vacations.

I'm certainly not suggesting that we do away with extended vacations – I know it takes me at least a week to turn off and to begin to “come down” from the usual daily pace. And I know that experts tell us that we should take at least two weeks at a time off in order to get the benefit of a vacation slowdown – but taking a vacation is different from going to the back of the boat. Because even when we're on vacation, we need to go to the back of the boat – it's there that we may feel God's full acceptance and savor the joy that is life apart from our work, our striving, our straining to do.

Before God calls us to do, God calls us to be.

I wonder if this story has implications for our community life too – we as a congregation need time at the back of the boat to center ourselves too. How can we do that as a community? Let's think about that – because we need to see each other as children of God in new ways – not just as members on a particular committee, or doing a particular job here – we need to see each other as “beings” not only “doings.” What a great way this is to transform us into a new community. A community called to be, not just to do.

The storms of life won't ever go away – we know that. But Jesus shows us the way to manage our response to those storms when he goes to the back of the boat and rests in the fingers of God's hands. Can we do any less if we see ourselves as disciples?

A minister tells of his days as a Navy submariner in the Pacific during World War II. “We would often come under depth charge attack by Japanese destroyers. The other sailors would be trembling with fear, while I just leaned back and read a comic book. One of them asked how I could be so calm. I explained to him that in my childhood I had very little supervision from my parents, so I spent many hours each day at the New Jersey shore. Sometimes a huge breaking wave would catch me by surprise and thrust me under the water, rolling me in the sand. But I learned when I would just relax, thousands of air bubbles like the fingers of God would catch me up and lift me to the surface. Now, whenever I find myself in trouble, I just relax and wait for the fingers of God to reach under me and lift me up.”

May each of us make the space to feel God's fingers reaching under us and lifting us up through whatever storms we face. May each of us go to the back of the boat not just this summer but regularly to emerge refreshed, renewed, and sure of God's love and care for each of us. Amen.